Using Living Labs to Facilitate Partnerships between Universities, Companies and Government

InterTradeIreland All-Island Innovation Programme
Community of Researchers

RESEARCH BRIEFING

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Mulvenna, M.D., Martin, S., McDade, D., Beamish, E., de Oliveira, A., Kivilehto, A., (2011) TRAIL Living Labs Survey 2011: A survey of the ENOLL living labs, University of Ulster, 40 pages, ISBN-978-1-85923-249-1.

Summary:

Outside the academic departments in which the concept of Living Labs developed, what they are and do is not widely understood. In an attempt to address this issue, this briefing introduces the concept of living labs and shows the results of the first survey of the living labs network.

Background to Living Labs

It is increasingly being recognised that 'Living labs' offer an excellent opportunity to engage with users to create new products and services. Living labs facilitate more general participation between actors in the innovation process, including those relating to the role of citizen as co-creator of government services. Living labs are defined as a "collection of people, equipment, services and technology to provide a test platform for research and experiments".

In other words, living labs offer a collaborative partnership framework in which user-centred, innovation activities can take place. They offer methods to garner data and evidence on design, processes that develop ideas, oversee engagement with users and how data is evaluated, and services that package all the constituent components that make up a living lab into coherent offerings that can be understood by the core stakeholder groups comprising users, businesses, civic partners and research organisations such as universities.

The architect and academic, William J. Mitchell, created the concept of living labs. Mitchell, based at MIT, was interested in how city dwellers could be involved more actively in urban planning and city design. The ideas of citizen involvement in the design process was subsequently taken up and developed further in Europe by various research communities. A small number of living labs formed the European Network of Living Labs (ENOLL) in 2006. Successive waves of new living labs have since been created and, in 2011, there were 15 living labs in the UK and over 270 living labs across Europe and beyond.

However, until now, there was no definitive survey of living labs and their role in facilitating partnerships for R&D and innovation has been unclear. In this research briefing we summarize the key findings from one of the first surveys of living labs, identifying the core characteristics of these innovation facilitators.

Research Method

Over a six-month period in 2011, 195 living labs were invited to complete an online survey. Over a quarter of those invited completed the survey and the key findings below are taken from these results.

Key Findings

(i) Geography of Living Labs

Most living labs provided support for product and/or service development, mostly related to using new technologies. While living labs began as an urban phenomenon, most living labs are now 'territorial', that is, they primarily operate at a regional level. Living labs therefore support territorial innovation, integrating research with local and regional development stakeholders and municipalities, involving citizens from all areas of life to address problems affecting the territory.

(ii) Living Labs partners

Universities and private sector organisations are well embedded in the activities of living labs. In contrast, national government departments and agencies are less likely to be involved in living labs, however this reinforces the finding that living labs are a regional phenomenon with few national governments (there are exceptions) having a well-developed policy frameworks relating to living labs, or indeed, arguably more broadly to support user or citizen participation. Most living labs were inter-connected in some way with at least four other labs and communicated at least quarterly with the other labs with the main reason for this networking being to share experiences and knowledge.

(iii) User Engagement

In terms of user numbers, many living labs involve small numbers of users but the majority support over 1,000 users. Responses to our survey indicated that superficial interaction with end users is relatively easy to do while more involved or complex interactions are more difficult. Clearly the translation process from end users to product or service innovation is difficult. It was interesting that some respondents found that the reason was a 'lost in translation' effect, for example: "it can be hard to get constructive and instructive comments from users that are not used to giving feedback".

(iv) Challenges facing Living Labs

The top challenges to living labs were (i) funding; (ii) getting more partners and/or end users involved; (iii) expanding lab activities and (iv) embedding user-centric activities amongst partners. The respondents indicated that funding their activities was a problem with most funding being project-based, sourced primarily from non-private sector sources including public and academia. Most living labs simply didn't know how sustainable their lab would be over long time periods. This may reflect the relatively precarious position of living labs, that while many benefit from the European Commission's support for organisations to form partnerships through R&D and innovation-funded activities, their position is not underpinned by national legislation, their governance is a partnership of different interests and they are often regional actors with a regional remit and outlook.

Summary

What was remarkable from our survey is the growing importance of living labs and the diversity of their purpose and scope. Despite the potential for these living labs in involving users throughout the innovation process, uncertainty surrounds their future as they face specific challenges. Many have a particular niche in which they operate. Some labs are region-based, others focus on a particular product family for example, automotive design, while others seek to address particular societal needs in, for example, healthcare. However, the use of technology to engage and support users as early as possible in product and service development is the common denominator for all of them.

About us

The InterTradeIreland All-Island Innovation Programme - Community of Researchers is an initiative to bring together academics, postgraduate students, policy makers and business people who are interested in innovation in Ireland. We aim to 'create a virtual community to strengthen innovation studies research in Ireland and its contribution to strategy, practice and policy.' This research briefing series is one way of achieving this aim along with meetings, workshops and postgraduate research awards.

For more information about the InterTradeIreland All-Island Innovation Programme and the Community of Researchers visit www.intertradeireland/all-island-innovation-programme/ or you can contact Bernadette McGahon on 028 3083 4168 (048 from Ireland).

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